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ABSTRACT

This document presents the perspectives of a British educational leader on the school improvement councils of Massachusetts. Comparisons are made between the Massachusetts Teachers' Association and the National Union of Teachers in London, including the bureaucratic apparati of each nation. The "school improvement council is a product of its culture" is a connecting theme of the entire paper, which ends with the presentation of two alternative scenarios of school improvement councils in Massachusetts in the future. (10 references) (SI)

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A Western European Perspective on School Improvement in Massachusetts

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Institute for Responsive Education

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July 1989

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At the end of April 1988, I moved through the looking glass. That is to say, for the first time in my life I crossed the Atlantic: I was invited to Boston to look at school improvement councils in Massachusetts. I wanted to see how far they were like, or unlike, outwardly similar arrangements for linking parents and schools in Europe with which I was familiar, as both a parent and an academic. (1)

> As soon as Alice got through the looking glass,
>
> She began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was different as possible. (2)

That was what moving from England to New England <u>felt</u> like. Outwardly, and at first encounter, things seemed very similar, and the feeling of similarity was reinforced by the fact that you and I speak (more or less) the same language. Inwardly, and when one began to probe a little more deeply, differences appeared. Often the differences were rooted in institutions and structures. Being in Boston, and being able to visit many historic sites evoking the American Revolution, I was repeatedly reminded of the incompetence and authoritarianism of the British colonial regime, and tempted to see Massachusetts as a deliberately created anti-England or anti-Europe. The state constitution, and therefore the way people run schools and the way they think about them, seemed to have been fixed in written laws at the end of the eighteenth century so that the errors of Europe should not be repeated in the New World. For me, all this lent an air of strangeness to many things which

Americans take for granted. Perhaps it was that strangeness which led Americans to lend an unexpected authority to banal things I said -- or was it my Queen-like manner of speech?

> Well, this is grand," said Alice
> "I never expected I should be a Queen so soon..." (3)

I was, and remain, very diffident about telling Americans about their own system on the basis of 16 days in Boston. Only you, my American readers, can tell me whether my first impressions make sense. Please do so. (4) Many of you will have little difficulty in telling me what you think; for if I may start with one generalization, one feeling that I had in the first days of my visit, was that all the Americans I met were good talkers. They had opinions, expressed them easily and directly, and could draw on plenty of knowledge to back them up.

> "How is it you can talk so nicely?" Alice said, hoping to get it [the Tiger-lily] into a better temper by a compliment.
>
> "I've been in many gardens before, but none of the flowers could talk". (5)

Before going to Massachusetts, I had conducted similar sorts of inquiries in France, Italy and West Germany as well as in my own country. Each inquiry took a lot of time and trouble. Written information was often in short supply or difficult to trace, research non-existent, informants elusive and sometimes on the defensive. I therefore expected that two weeks in Boston would be so short that it would be a waste of time. To my amazement and delight, I soon discovered that Boston was awash with information about school improvement councils -- schools, politics, everything.

I sought the basic facts and timetabling of recent events in the Boston Globe, and found two or three reporters there whose specialist reporting of educational issues over the years is at least as good as anything in the British national quality press. I found a huge range of organizations, associations and groups, most of them by European standards astonishingly well-supported and well-resourced, equipped with secretaries, filing cabinets and word processors, and dedicated to the discovery and dissemination of information and education. More or less responsible for all this was a great range of articulate idealists, some formally involved in the political machine, some not, but all very well informed and prepared to talk to an itinerant Englishman at the drop of a hat.

Confronted with all this, I began to suffer from an inferiority complex. Were Americans simply more virtuous than Europeans? Did they have a sharper sense of civic responsibility? Were they more energetic and less easily fatigued? How otherwise did they sustain this vast array of democratic institutions (for school improvement councils were, evidently, only a small recent addition to a complex machinery for involving ordinary citizens with the management of education)? How did they assemble and process the vast amounts of information, of typed and printed pages, with which they filled my briefcase at every meeting? I began to glimpse an answer to these questions during a visit to the Massachusetts Teachers' Association: I commented to my informant there that the (in my eyes) grandiose premises from which the MTA operates seemed to me to be roughly comparable with

those of the National Union of Teachers in London. However, the NUT serves a nation of 56 million people as opposed to a state of six millions, so to me the discrepancy in resourcing was striking. His reply was the the MTA needed to be big because it had the oversight of about 400 different teachers' contracts negotiated with the same number of school districts. This led me to the dawning recognition that the quantity of information and the apparently high level of civic engagement were less a product of individual virtue than a natural result of culturally determined structures. In Alice's terms, if flowers could talk, it was because circumstances encouraged them to do so.

> "Put you hand down and feel the ground", said the Tiger-lily. "Then you'll know why [flowers can talk]." Alice did so. "It's very hard", she said, "but I don't see what that has to do with it". (6)

> "In most gardens", the Tiger-lilly said, "they make the beds too soft -- so that the flowers are always asleep". This sounded like a very good reason, and Alice was quite pleased to know it...

Passionate devotion to local control of education seemed to me to explain, or at least illuminate, a great deal that as a foreigner I found surprising. For many Americans, education seemed to represent one area of public policy upon which it was possible to make some impact. It was an acceptable arena within which opposing values could clash, often in a ritualistic sort of way on a set list of issues: school prayers, sex education, etc. In this sense, and because of their natural concern for their own children, schools were available for citizen action, and within reach. The mechanism for control and change was the local taxation system which in turn was subject to the electoral

process. From this flowed a preoccupation with money, and with measurable inputs and outputs. This in turn required a massive industry for the production, processing and dissemination of information about education. Even if much of this was never used, it had to be available, because if the information was not there, somewhere, its absence might be unearthed by some probing politician or litigious voter with a grudge. To operate this system, a large bureaucratic superstructure was necessary. Quite often, when people talked about "education", they seemed to be talking more about this superstructure than about the central transaction between teacher and pupil which justified its existence. The overall impression upon the European observer was on of great liveliness and some confusion -- perhaps like Alice's first reactions to passing through the looking glass:

> "They don't keep this room so tidy as the other", Alice thought to herself...(7)

As I reflected on this "untidiness", I began to see that a style of change was also built into these structures. The bureaucracy did not seem to be a straight "authoritarian" bureaucracy in the European style, whose job was essentially to carry out orders generated at the center of society. It was more like a graveyard of attempts to reform itself. School improvement councils were an excellent example of this. The "Act Improving the Public Schools of the Commonwealth" (Chapter 188) which set them up in 1985 clearly intended the school improvement council to spark off creative cooperation between teachers and parents for the benefit of children and <u>to the exclusion of the bureaucratic</u>

apparatus. In each school, a small committee (three elected teachers, three elected parents, one non-parent appointed by the school board, the school principal in the chair) has as its sole task the spending of an extra sum of money allocated by the state additional to the regular running costs of the school. To all intents and puposes, there are no constraints upon the spending of this money. The absence of contraints is deliberate: it is expected that the spending of this grant will in the long run be a learning experience for all concerned, and also for the school and for its parent body as institutions or collective. Parents and teachers will, it is hoped, increasingly see the potential of schools as servants and regenerators of local communities, and virtuous circles will be set in motion to raise levels of commitment and innovation amoung teachers, and of interest and involvement among parents.

This device is interesting and positive, and I have no wish to subvert it by snide criticisms. However, what struck me as a foreigner is how strongly the school improvement council is a product of its culture. It is grafted onto a system which is already structured to produce a high level of lay involvement and creative change in response to local pressures. What is an elected school board (known in Massachusetts as a school committee) if not a device for securing precisely those objectives? What are PTAs if not citizen associations for achieving those ends? Why should the legislators seek a new mechanism to perform tasks for which a plethora of older mechanisms seemed already to litter the landscape?

In asking these naive questions, I sometimes felt like the boy in Hans Christian Andersen's story The Emperor's New Clothes. It was tactfully explained to me that, whatever may have been the original purposes of institutions such as school committees or PTAs, they are now believed by many people (not all) to have become bureaucratized or diverted from their original broad purposes or preoccupied only with certain aspects of those purposes. For a fresh, wide-ranging vision a new device was needed, calling upon a fresh set of people, encouraging them by giving them new money with which to do new things.

Thus the deep-rooted commitment to local control does get people involved in the management of schools -- but their very success tends to turn them into a vested interest. Both the ideological commitment to localism and the corresponding reluctance of central authority (in this case, the state) to act in a directive style means that change is then attempted not by a head-on attack on vested interests but by adding different mechanisms. Inevitably, these mechanisms start to generate their own bureaucracy. Thus, for example, it is very rightly preceived that if the dynamic learning process which is central to the ideals of the school improvement council is to occur, information has to be collected and effectively disseminated round the state. The imaginative choices of some SICs have to be communicated to other SICs whose choices are felt by some to be more pedestrian. This collection and dissemination of information is essentially a bureaucratic process, and there is an obvious risk that SICs too will rapidly become another bureaucratic empire, governed by set

annual routines and procedures and run by rapidly solidifying cliques. This inherent tension is clearly seen by many of the people most concerned that SICs should succeed.

My surprise at the thoroughness of localism in Massachusetts is of course very European and indeed my stay, however brief, reminded me of my Europeanness. The things that really struck me about the decision-making process were quite sharp differences in attitudes towards authority and ideology. Each of the four Western European countries with which I am most familiar (8) is, like the U.S., a "democracy" -- i.e., organized so that political decision are arrived at after open and public debate, subject to criticism, challengeable at law, etc. This process must, however, be balanced against the need for clear and authoritative decisions at a central point, and the need for such decisions to be decisively implemented and effectively monitored. While the balance between these two aspects of democratic decision-making is everywhere unstable, it is my strong impression that European societies (including Britain) value authoritativeness more highly than does the U.S. This seems to be linked to the feature which to a European observer of the American political scene is perhaps the most disorientating of all: the apparent absence of ideology. This is, of course, a superficial impression: ideology is present in the U.S., and similar value arguments are under way on both sides of the Atlantic. In the U.S. however, those arguments tend not to be mediated through organized political structures more or less neatly categorizable as "right" and "left" and offering competing but more or less coherent aggregations of policies over

a wide range of decision-making. It is surely this ideological incoherence (as it seems to the European mind), these "habits of the heart" (9), that give to education its distinct importance in America as an arena for other value-issues to confront each other. And it is this which makes decisive and authoritative central change so difficult to achieve, and puts a premium on more or less incremental and consensual change such as those incorporated into Chapter 188 (including school improvement councils). The very phrase "school improvement" is almost aggressively non-ideological: who would oppose the improvement of schools? Yet the non-ideological label veils a range of sharply ideological criticisms.

If phrases like "incoherence" and "untidiness" suggest some sense of European superiority, I hasten to disclaim it and to focus attention more on the metaphor of "balance". By emphasizing central authority, Western Europe may in certain circumstances adjust more decisively to certain sorts of change, but may equally lose the benefits of lay involvement and concern. If American arguments sometimes seen confused and segmented, at least their localism and their segmentation mean that a wide range of people without particular qualifications really feel they have something to contribute. The comparison shows only that what you gain on the swings, you lose on the roundabouts.

To be reminded that school improvement councils are a product of American cultural patterns may be of interest to American readers, but does not help them to predict future developments nor to maximize the potential of the new structures for openness and

dynamism and minimize the prospects of inertia and ossification. Precisely because I am very conscious of the strong cultural factor in all such developments, I am reluctant to appear to offer a European remedy for American discontents. Also, I am as a result of previous study and personal experience somewhat skeptical about parents as the Factor X which will transform the education system. Having said that, however, I think that to view SICs as a characteristic outcome of a particular place and time helps us to see more clearly two alternative scenarios for the next few years:

Scenario A Current financial problems worsen as Proposition 2 1/2 (limiting local tax revenues in Massachusetts) is combined with a cap on state expenditures. Even if the financing of the school improvement fund is maintained, members of SICs become increasingly frustrated as they see themselves merely providing aspirins for chronic diseases. SICs become another part of the bureaucratic infra-structure, a sort of vestigial appendix which never achieved a real function because circumstances were hostile.

Scenario B The minority which takes on the small but positive task of deciding on the expenditure of the money from the school improvement fund become sufficiently well-informed about the needs of schools, the potential for change and the objective limits to

change, to communicate effectively and rationally with a larger minority (many of whom will be active already within existing structures and organizations) and spearhead a movement towards a more coherent dispersal of authority round the system.

Scenario B seems the more difficult and unlikely because it requires hard thinking and firm action to modify existing power structures. If it is to come about it calls for speed, because it depends on sufficient momentum building up to effect real change. On the other hand, the great richness of interlocking structures and organizations and communication networks in a society like that of Massachusetts does offer the real possibility of a sort of multiplier effect once some initial drive has been established. While I am not overly optimistic, I am more optimistic than I was before I went to Boston and met a wide range of rather unusual and impressive people. This article is a sort of "thank you" to them. If looking at their own system from outside helps even half a dozen of them to channel their energies more enthusiastically and effectively, who knows? Scenario B might really work.

"Which do you think it was?" (10) Through the Looking Glass ends by asking a question of the reader: so do I.

REFERENCES

1. See Beattie, Nicholas. Professional parents: parent participation in four Western European countries. London and Philadelphia, Falmer Press, 1985.

2. Carroll, Lewis Through the looking glass and what Alice found there, 1872. The edition quoted is The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll, London, Chancellor Press, 1982, p. 12.

3. Ibid., p. 215.

4. I can be contacted at the Centre for Community and Educational Policy Studies, University of Liverpool, P.O. Box 147, Liverpool L69 3BX, Great Britain. I am trying to write a more "serious" account of school improvement councils in context, so comments and criticisms really would be helpful.

5. Carroll, op. cit., p. 139.

6. Ibid., p. 139.

7. Ibid., p. 128.

8. Britain, France, German Federal Republic, Italy.

9. Bellah, Robert N. et al. Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life. New York, Harper and Row 1985. I found this much-discussed book helpful in thinking about the strangeness that I experienced and try to convey in this piece.

10. Carroll, op. cit., p. 233.